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ABSTRACT

The stereotype of women athletes in college is predominantly positive rather than negative. In one study, female athletes were seen to be strong, strong-willed, leaders, brave and healthy. In the second study, women were judged to be significantly more attractive when the interviewer was male, and males gave significantly higher ratings than females. There were no significant differences between the attractiveness ratings of athletes and non-athletes. In the third study, male and female subjects selected the athlete from a row of pictures significantly more often than chance would indicate. The date indicate that the woman who participates in athletics is recognizable but that she is considered no less attractive by nature of her being an athlete. (BN)

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THE STEREOTYPE AND RECOGNITION OF FEMALE ATHLETES

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Abstract

Three studies investigating the stereotype of the female athlete were performed. In the first, 40 university students rated "female athletes" on 17 bipolar traits. Female athletes were seen to be "strong," "strong-willed," "leaders," "brave" and "healthy." The second study compared the attractiveness ratings of athletes and non-athletes. Participants rated 34 photographed women, of whom ten were athletes, on an attractiveness scale of 1-10. Ten rows of photographs from the college yearbook of another institution were shown to 15 male and 15 female students, by a male or female experimenter. Women were judged to be significantly more attractive when the interviewer was male, and males gave significantly higher ratings than females. There were no significant differences between the attractiveness ratings of athletes and non-athletes. In the third study, 30 additional students were asked to select the athlete from each of the same ten rows of pictures. Male and female subjects correctly selected the athlete significantly better than chance. Attractiveness ratings for women selected as athletes (whether in fact they were athletes or not) were not significantly different from women not selected, and selected athletes were not rated more or less attractive than those not selected. The data indicate that the woman who participates in athletics is recognizable but that she is considered no less attractive than other women. The stereotype which allows for successful identification of female athletes is discussed.

One of the fastest growing minority groups in America is that of women athletes. Changes in the law as well as changes in consciousness have radically increased opportunities for women to participate in organized athletics.

There have been a number of studies on the stereotypes held of women athletes. For the most part, these studies have indicated a negative stereotype (Metheny, 1965; Harris, 1971; Griffin, 1973; Gerber, Felshin, Berlin and Wyrick, 1974). As Snyder and Kivlin (1975) put it, "To be a female and an athlete have traditionally been contradictory roles with conflicting role expectations."

But in their research comparing women gymnasts, basketball players and nonathletes on psychological well-being and body image, Snyder and Kivlin (1975) found that the women athletes had more positive self-attitudes than the nonathletes. They conclude: "Even though women athletes have frequently received negative sanctions, their participation in sports has apparently been psychologically satisfying and rewarding. Perhaps the social costs of athletic participation by women today are not as great as previously...."

It is the purpose of these three studies to investigate the current stereotype of women athletes, to compare the stereotype to actual ratings of photographs of female athletes, and to test the ability of people to select athletes from among a group of non-athletes. It was predicted that college students would have a slightly negative stereotype of women athletes, would see them as unattractive and masculine, and that in attempting to identify

athletes they would tend to select less attractive women from among a group of photographs.

Study 1

Methods and purpose. The purpose of the first study was to determine the prevailing stereotype of the female athlete. Forty randomly selected students (20 males and 20 females) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G) were asked to rate "female athletes" on 17 bipolar adjective scales (e.g., "strong-weak," "smart-stupid," "cold-warm," etc.). A seven point scale, presented in a Likert format, was used. Mean scores differing by more than one point from the neutral position (four) were considered to constitute a shared stereotype.

Results. The shared sterotype consisted of five of the 17 bipolar traits. Female athletes were seen as "healthy" rather than "sickly," "leaders" rather than "followers," "strong-willed" rather than "weak-willed," "brave" as opposed to "cowardly," and "strong" rather than "weak." There were only two ratings below the neutral point of four, though neither was far enough below it to constitute part of the shared stereotype: women athletes were seen as slightly "unattractive" and slightly "masculine."

Study 2

Methods and purpose. The second study attempted to compare ratings of the attractiveness of actual athletes and non-athletes in order to determine if women athletes are indeed seen as less attractive than non-athletes. Thirty-four yearbook pictures from a small women's college in North Carolina were used; they included

only the head and shoulders of the woman photographed. Ten of the 34 photographs were of women on the varsity basketball, golf or tennis teams. These were randomly selected from the names listed under the team photos. The other 24 pictures consisted of those women whose pictures were on the same row as the selected athletes; these, the non-athletes, served as a control group. There were thus ten rows of photographs. Seven rows contained the athlete and two other women, and three rows contained the athlete and three other women.

Thirty more UNC-G students were randomly selected and asked to rate the 34 photographed women on an attractiveness scale of 1-10. Seven males and eight females were interviewed by a female experimenter, and the remaining eight males and seven females were interviewed by a male experimenter.

Results. There were no significant differences between the attractiveness ratings of the female athletes and non-athletes ($\bar{x}_1$=5.92, $\bar{x}_2$=6.14, t=0.79, n.s.). There were, however, significant differences based on the sex of the subject and the sex of the experimenter. Male subjects rated all the pictures as more attractive than did female subjects ($\bar{x}_1$=6.55, $\bar{x}_2$=5.62, t=3.89, df=28, $p < .002$). And those subjects interviewed by the male experimenter rated the women in the yearbook pictures as more attractive than did the subjects interviewed by the female experimenter ($\bar{x}_1$=6.62, $\bar{x}_2$=5.60, t=4.05, df=28, $p < .002$).

Study 3

Methods and purpose. The purpose of the third study was to

investigate whether or not people could correctly differentiate athletes from non-athletes. Thirty additional randomly selected UNC-G students were shown the same ten groups of photographs used in Study 2 and asked to select which woman they thought was the athlete. Again half the subjects (eight males and seven females) were interviewed by a female and the other half (seven males and eight females) by a male. The subjects were shown the ten rows of pictures and given a sheet on which to record their choices. Printed on the sheet were the following directions: "You will be shown ten groups of pictures of college women. One of the women in each row participates in either tennis, golf, or basketball. Circle the number of the woman you think is the athlete. After doing this please give a short statement indicating how, in general, you selected the athlete."

Results. Female subjects accurately chose the athlete 60% of the time, and male subjects did so 50% of the time. A chi square test revealed that these results are far beyond the possibilities of selection by chance ($x^2=28.02$, df=1, $p < .01$ for rows containing three pictures; $x^2=38.40$, df=1, $p < .01$ for rows containing four pictures). The ability to select the athlete at better-than-chance accuracy was true for subjects interviewed by the male experimenter and for subjects interviewed by the female experimenter.

Attractiveness ratings for the women selected as athletes (regardless of whether or not they were actually athletes) were not significantly different from those of women not selected ($t=0.92$, df=32, n.s.). In addition, those women who were selected

as athletes and who actually were athletes were not rated significantly more or less attractive than non-selected athletes (t=1.01, df=8, n.s.).

When subjects did not choose the correct woman as the athlete, 60% of the time the picture selected was rated as more attractive than the true athlete. Finally, the woman rated as most attractive was selected as the athlete 31 times, while the woman rated the least attractive was chosen 32 times.

Discussion

The results of these three studies are suggestive in a number of ways. First of all, the stereotype of women athletes in college is predominantly positive rather than negative. Thirteen of the 17 ratings of the bipolar adjective scales in the first study were in the socially desirable direction. Although the stereotype was predominantly positive, it is notable that the two lowest ratings indicated that female athletes are seen as slightly "unattractive" and "masculine."

The second study indicated, however, that when asked to rate photographs of actual female athletes for attractiveness, college students rated them neither higher nor lower than they rated a control group of non-athletes. Thus the slight suggestion in Study 1 that women athletes are less attractive was not borne out by Study 2. Interestingly men rated all the photographs higher than did women, which suggests that women are more critical of feminine attractiveness than men are. In addition, those interviewed by the male experimenter rated the women more attractive than did those

interivewed by the female experimenter. We can only explain this finding by pointing out that the female interviewer was an extremely attractive young woman, and the photographed women may have seemed less attractive by comparison.

The third study provided the most striking finding of all--male and female subjects, being interviewed by a male or female experimenter, could select the actual female athlete from among a group of three or four yearbook pictures far better than chance. Our confidence in this finding is even greater because we found the very same pattern in a pilot study we ran using 30 subjects (but using only a female experimenter). How were they able to do so? It is our belief that the shared stereotype found in Study 1 which depicted athletes as "strong," "strong-willed," "healthy," "brave" and "leaders" may be, at least in part, a reality stereotype. Perhaps female athletes can be recognized because they have these traits. When asked to comment upon how they made their choices, the subjects in the third study were most likely to say that they chose the women they did because they were "healthy," "in good shape," "energetic," "outdoorsy," "determined," or "attentive."

We therefore asked an additional group of 10 Guilford College students (5 male, 5 female) to rate the same yearbook photos used in the second and third studies on 10 bipolar adjective scales designed to investigate the suggestions of the subjects in the third study. The scales used were: weak-strong, strongwilled-weakwilled, follower-leader, cowardly-brave, sickly-healthy, attentive-inattentive, determined-unsure, energetic-lackadaisical, masculine-

feminine, and long hair-short hair. The athletes were rated as significantly more "strong" (t=2.57, df=198, $p < .01$), "leader" (t=2.40, df=198, $p < .05$), "healthy" (t=2.22, df=198, $p < .05$), "masculine" (t=3.57, df=198, $p < .01$); there were no significant differences on the other six scales. These data, then, suggest that there are definite cues that distinguish athletes from non-athletes. Athletes are seen as stronger and healthier, as (somehow) showing qualities of leadership, and as more masculine than non-athletes. It is noteworthy that the higher ratings on "strong" and "masculine" do not lead to differential ratings on "attractive."

The data presented in these studies indicate that the woman who participates in sports _is_ recognizable, but is no less attractive than other women.

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